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RONCO Executives Talk About Demining Integration and the IMAS Contract

An Interview with Lawrence Crandall, Stephen Edelmann and A. David Lundberg

by Margaret Busé,
MAIC

Can you give me a brief history of how RONCO got started with demining?

Stephen Edelmann: We started working internationally in 1980. In the late '80s, we won an open competition to assist the U.S. government in running a humanitarian assistance program in war-affected Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. Part of that program was training Afghans on the use of mules as pack animals so that they could bring supplies over the mountain. When that program was done, we suggested to the U.S. Embassy that they try a pilot program using mine-detecting dogs and to approach the Thai Army, who had a program, to contribute to the Afghanistan war effort. That was done, and the Thais contributed 14 dogs and trainers. We used the facilities that had been previously used for the mule training. The program was very successful, and the U.S. government asked us to expand it and establish a mine dog training center and to train a cadre of Afghan NGOs that, to this day, still continues to successfully operate in the form of an NGO we created. We left

them with 92 mine-detecting dogs along with a full coterie of vehicles and supplies. This program has continued to expand and now employs over 4,000. This is a prime example of RONCO's philosophy—to help develop institutional capacity and indigenous personnel. From here, we moved to Mozambique where we won a contract to clear 2,200 km of road that allowed over one million Mozambican refugees to return to their homes. We have been involved in demining for over 12 years, probably longer than anyone in the field.

Can you tell me some of the challenges in setting up a successful demining program?

Edelmann: They range from logistics to cultural. Wherever we go, we are going into a difficult environment because it is post conflict and that requires innovation on our part. We have no external support and have to rely on ourselves to set up facilities, procurement, security and administration.

Lawrence Crandall: Historically, the challenges have changed over time. Initially, for the Afghan program, the challenge was to get the U.S. government to agree to fund the first humanitarian demining program because there were no policy precedents, guidelines or experienced personnel in the bureaucracy. The only demining the U.S. military had done was for tactical and military purposes. Humanitarian activities were not to be found. The challenge was trying to resolve a very serious issue. There was a multi-billion dollar humanitarian program to assist the Afghans, but a lot of the people we were training were being killed or maimed by mines. We were seeing our investments in these people lost. Washington had no sympathy. There was no lobby; there were no handbooks that showed you how to do it, and a conservative bureaucracy was afraid of it. We finally involved a sympathetic senator from New Hampshire and a Texas congressman, and they successfully lobbied for the program. That was done, and the program started. Once we got the demining program going in Afghanistan, we tried to hand it off to the U.N., and they would

not go anywhere near it. They said, "Oh no, we don't do this." Again, it was because of a lack of precedent and experienced personnel in this area. We wanted to phase out and institutionalize it, so we approached various international NGOs, and no NGO would touch it. So, we ended up running the program many years longer than we would have liked and finally handed it over to the U.N. Today, we are facing different challenges. Dave is starting a demining program in Albania.

A. David Lundberg: The Albania program is remotely located on the Kosovo-Albanian border. There is no infrastructure that you can plug into. We are essentially picking up a piece of our Bosnia operation and moving it to Albania. Finding housing, medical supplies, food, transport—everything you need for this type of operation—is part of our concern. We must import Bosnian deminers into Albania because there are no trained in-country personnel available. Anytime you are working in the developing world, it is difficult. The biggest challenge we face is building and developing indigenous capacity. It was easy to do in Kuwait, which was a huge operation, and it was easy to bring in expats and machinery, do the job and leave. Building indigenous capacity to leave behind, that is what gets difficult. You have to affect both training

and attitudinal changes. For instance, it is typical to hear that Muslims won't work with dogs. That is simply not true when you get them exposed to the use of dogs. When we went to Mozambique, we were told

by a number of people that there would be no way we would get them to use dogs because the Portuguese use dogs as police dogs and attack dogs. You just have to overcome these stereotypes. RONCO has been able to overcome this because we started as a development firm. We have a history working in the developing world, so we know how to work in that environment, and we brought our expertise to demining. It is, initially, the same. You are just dealing with a different end product. You are developing deminers, dogs, logistics, people and medics.



RONCO deminer ready to start his day in the field.

Photo c/o Tony Allen/RONCO.

How do you monitor the success or difficulties of your established programs once you have left a country?

Edelmann: With the Afghan program, we sent people back periodically for a number of years to monitor the dogs and the training. In Rwanda, we were tasked with incorporating a mine dog program into the military, which is winding down. We will probably use



The Afghanistan Mule Training Center became the first mine dog center. RONCO originally imported pack mules from Missouri and Tennessee to help war-torn Afghanistan get supplies over the mountains.

Photo c/o RONCO

the same tactic there. We will send people back to monitor the quality, training, etc. Our approach is to wean ourselves from the program as quickly as possible consistent with the ability for our counterparts to take over. The Afghan program is doing great six years after we have left. That is the key: Can you go back three, four, five years later and see what is operating successfully? We left the Afghans with the capacity not only to function efficiently and effectively in the field, but also from a financial standpoint. This ability allowed them to approach donors with confidence. One of the reasons is that donors can see where their money is going from the financial system that we helped them set up. In a donor's mind, that is a significant point. We try to establish a competency technically but also efficient administration. Which country you are working in and what their requirements are also determines what you need to do. You may be at one end of the spectrum, like the Afghan program where you are setting up everything, or the opposite end, like in Namibia where you are only doing basic demining.

Crandall: In Afghanistan, we created an NGO; in Rwanda, a government capacity was created. In the Balkans, RONCO helped develop three commercial companies, and they are operating and bidding on projects on their own and, in some cases, becoming part of our competition and sometimes our partners as well.

Edelmann: Our clients, for instance, like the U.S. Department of State, determine these tasking. Collaboratively, we come up with a program that works. In the Balkans, we had to set up three private companies because the government, at the time, offered us little choice. The Bosnian-Croat side had no working government, the Serbs were considered outlaws and the Muslims, like many others, were in disarray—this is what the situation was like in 1996. An NGO didn't seem feasible because of impenetrable regulations. So, we decided to develop private companies. The situation determines what we do.

Does RONCO just set up indigenous capacity, or do you actively get tasked to remove mines?

Lundberg: It's a little bit of both. In Rwanda and Afghanistan, we were tasked with specific jobs. On the Kosovo/Albanian border, we were tasked with removing mines from the border and not to worry about building indigenous capacity. In the case of Mozambique, we cleared 2,200 km of roads. We

ended up going in and training Mozambicans from scratch for dog handlers, logistics [and] transportation, and when we left, we left with that capacity sitting there. We draw on that capacity to assist RONCO with other demining operations like using the Mozambicans on the Kosovo-Albanian border. We do this at far lower cost than using U.S. technicians.

Edelmann: Here is another example of how much indigenous capacity building contains costs. Because there was uncertainty as to clearance rates and procedures, we were contracted by the DoD to perform quality assurance in Guantanamo Bay behind a Marine Corps demining operation. We brought in our Bosnian deminers. Not only does this keep your indigenous capacity working, but also, it is exceedingly cost effective. People have said for many years that it takes a lot of money to take mines out of the ground—not so. In Mozambique, we were able to clear 2,200 km of road at 31 cents a square meter; the standard is \$1.50 (U.S.) a square meter. It is not the cost of taking the mine out of the ground; it is the clearing of the area that is suspect. If there is an explosion in a field and you don't know if there is a mine field there or if it is an isolated explosion, you have to survey that entire field and clear it.

Lundberg: In the case of Mozambique, we were there for two years, and the initial mobilization costs were high because you are starting up a whole operation. The longer you are in a place doing this, the cheaper it gets. One of our biggest problems is that many of our efforts are short efforts—two to three months. The costs for mobilizing to do 200,000 sq. m are similar to the costs of being there for two years. So, if you were to look at our costs for being on the job for two months, the costs are pretty high. If you were to extend those costs two years, those cost per square meter at the end of the day are going to be a lot less. If Mozambique had been a two month program, the cost would have been three to four dollars per sq. meter.

Are your surveys mostly done for you or do you have to go in and do the surveys?

Edelmann: It's a mixed bag. We get tasked, as in the Balkans, with areas that survey work that needs to be done. In Rwanda, the surveys had already been done.

Lundberg: We are very careful about going in behind a survey that has been done. It can quickly become

apparent that a survey may not have relevance. So, we always check with what is there.

Crandall: We are starting a new project in Thailand, and the surveys are being done now by other donors. At the request of the Thais, our task leader is involved in the scope of the work. Our man out there is monitoring the surveys on a regular basis, and he knows the individual who is heading the survey and trusts him.

Edelmann: You are putting people in jeopardy. You have to have confidence in the survey.

Many of the NGOs believe in the integrated approach to humanitarian demining. Demining, mine awareness and victim assistance are all aspects that should go on simultaneously and all be incorporated for humanitarian demining to be successful. How does RONCO, which specializes in only one aspect, navigate this approach?

Crandall: Integrated development, which is what your talking about, is a concept that has been played with in the development world for about 30 to 40 years. It is rather long of tooth. Many of the NGOs have taken on this integrated approach as a sort of mantra. There are better and more proven approaches. Trying to integrate all aspects under one organization just can't happen, and, if it does, it is under extraordinarily high cost. We found, as an institution and myself as an individual, that comments about integrated mine action are suspect. Traditional integrated development practices arose from different development experiences than demining in post conflict situations. While the client rules, we prefer to market simpler, cheaper and demonstrably workable solutions.

Edelmann: It is one of those concepts that sounds great. Why don't we just integrate everything? The integration factor becomes the goal, and you lose sight

of everything that you are trying to get done and accomplish—like saving lives.

Crandall: We are in the development business and started as a development business. We added demining in 1989. Demining is demining, as far as we are concerned. We build private sector enterprises, and we undertake agriculture and other development



When a mine detecting dog is first deployed, it must initially work with the handler to whom it bonded in training.
Photo c/o Tony Allen/ RONCO

projects. We see demining as a tool to open the door for education, agriculture and other sectors. You are looking at people that did it for over 30 thirty years, so we are talking from experience. The people who depend on us to make their farm fields and schoolyards safe would lose if we tried to integrate. Grafting dissimilar elements onto each other, while attractive in the abstract, in our experience, isn't the best approach in many, if not most, demining situations.

Edelmann: Remember, you are looking at a company that has been and is involved in a number of development programs.

Crandall: Now, in the terms of demining, you are integrating safety, medical, technology, and dogs

[and] funding. If you want to call that an integrated approach to demining, that is what we do. That is already a complex package.

How did RONCO get into using dogs as their primary focus?

Crandall: RONCO got started with dogs in Afghanistan. During the Soviet invasion, to take equipment into the country would have meant the Soviet airplanes would have destroyed it. You needed a technology that would not draw a lot of notice to what you were doing. We knew that the U.S. Army had spent a great deal of time working with the Thai army, who was working with dogs in demining along the Cambodian border. We needed a low cost, efficient technology, and dogs were the answer. We contacted the Thai army and negotiated to pick up their handlers and dogs and flew back to Pakistan in what was then a covert operation.

Lundberg: Dogs are just one important part of our tool kit. We are using flails and other equipment to clear vegetation. There is a perception around the world that RONCO is dogs. That is true, but it is only one element to our operation. Whenever possible, we also integrate manual deminers and machinery.

There is a lot of debate regarding dog use vs. manual demining. Many people are suspect of dog use in demining.

Crandall: We assume you are referring to productivity. We don't agree with that. Handicap International went into our operation in Afghanistan and took a look at our data on dogs. In the worst case, dogs were found to be twice as effective as manual demining alone. In the best case, it was 20-30 times more effective. We are finding that demining is faster and safer using dogs. In some cases, like in Bosnia with the plastic mines, the metal content is so low that a metal detector can't find them, but you can with the dog because they detect explosive vapors.

Edelmann: Also, our dogs are trained on trip wires. There are not any other dogs in the world trained on trip wires. The way we train our dogs and handlers is unique. It remains the best approach from our perspective. Like explosive vapor signatures, tripwires create an acoustical signature that can be detected.

Lundberg: Invariably, when we hire a new deminer,

the dogs may put them off. After working with us, they won't go into a mine field without a dog.

Edelmann: How do you demine a reinforced concrete bridge or building? Detectors are essentially useless. An integrated team of manual deminers and dogs, in our experience, is the most cost effective, safe and speediest method.

Lundberg: You have to remember there are RONCO dogs and other dogs out there. The mine-detecting dog is becoming more popular, and other dog outfitters are starting up because of the success of RONCO. We have seen those dogs, and we have been called in to retrain those dogs. And that is not to say that other companies' dogs are bad. There are some good ones, but there can be a big difference in dogs.

Can you tell me about the Integrated Mine Action Support or the IMAS contract?

Lundberg: We can talk about IMAS from RONCO's point of view, but we encourage you to talk to the State Department because we want to make it clear that we don't represent the U.S. government. There was a perception out there about this contract that, to some extent, may still exist. I had a number of NGOs sitting at this conference table to talk about the IMAS contract who were rather upset. It was perceived that RONCO suddenly had \$250 million, and people wanted to know: Were we going to be sharing any of that money? That was everyone's opening remarks. They didn't understand what that contract was and is. The IMAS contract is an indefinite quantity type contract in that [the] State Department tells RONCO what it wants done via task orders. RONCO is not controlling this money or [the] identification of the tasks. The State Department is giving us our guidance, our tasks and what they want us to do. Some of those tasks involve procurement of demining equipment only. There are probably over 50 tasks since we started in September 1999. Other tasks involve services we are being asked to provide. Right now, we are in Kosovo; we have six demining teams primarily picking up cluster bombs. We are going into the Kosovo-Albania border with two fully equipped teams for the next five months. We are going into Oman to develop a mine detecting dog capacity, which will be integrated with their demining programs. We do whatever the State Department directs us to do. We give them a written response to their task order request. Then we sit down and negotiate about the task order. In a few weeks, we are

usually mobilized to action. We are putting a study team in Lebanon, as we speak, that is going to work on the efficiency of a mine dog program in Lebanon.

What is RONCO planning for 2000?

Lundberg: We are hopeful the World Bank will reappear. Not a lot has come out of the World Bank in the last few years. Its financial strength and relative influence make it a potential strong partner. The World Bank has taken some time off from demining but may be getting back into it, and, if that is the case, we will be bidding for those options.

Do you use any specialized Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)?

Lundberg: We deal with Second Chance, a U.S. firm that specializes in this [Personal Protective Equipment]. We have had them design specific RONCO designs like the blast collar, which is a little higher and deflects the blast.

Crandall: We just introduced into the Balkans a new helmet, which is really just a visor. The visor wraps around and decreases the need for a helmet, which can be very hot. That little bit of a change improves a deminer's effectiveness by 15 or 20 percent. We are always trying to make the deminers' equipment better.

Is there anything else you would like to mention before we close?

Lundberg: I would like to mention that in all the years that RONCO has been in demining, we have only lost two people to accidents. I don't think that you can find anyone who has been doing it this long that can say that. A big factor is the dogs. Safety is a major factor with us. We are very careful with the deminers we hire. They have to forget the cowboy attitude and work with RONCO's operating procedures; otherwise, they can't work for us. It pays off for us. We carry extensive insurance on our deminers, but, even so, our rates are low because of our accident rate.

Founded in 1974, RONCO Consulting Company is an international professional services firm with extensive knowledge in a wide range of development issues. Along with humanitarian demining, RONCO specializes in privatization and private enterprise development, agribusiness and procurement services. In 1999, RONCO won the open competitive bidding

for the IMAS contract sponsored by the Humanitarian Demining Programs Office in the Political-Military Bureau of the Department of State. ■

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In general, dogs are fully effective at finding explosives 10 centimeters below the surface. Neither dogs nor detectors can easily find mines under 30 centimeters of heavy clay soil.

Photo c/o Tony Allen/RONCO

